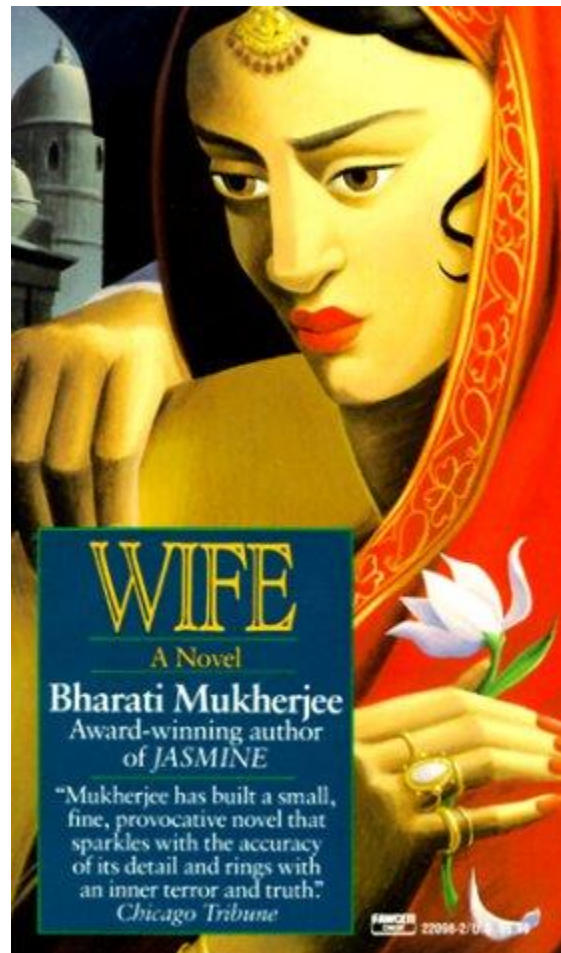


Disrupted Lives and Distorted Roots in Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife*

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Abstract

Migration has become a common phenomenon in the present era of globalization and technological advancements. Though migration fulfills the primary objective of the immigrants, their life on the adopted land is replete with chaos. Fascinated by the prosperity on the foreign land and to retain their hard-earned position, the immigrants attempt to assimilate with the alien culture that leads them to confront culture shock, develop nostalgia and experience loneliness as well as

alienation. Eventually, the immigrants feel that they neither belong to the adopted country nor to their motherland. Indeed, the psychological traumas make the immigrant communities understand how their distorted roots disrupt their otherwise calm life. This paper analyses the diasporic experiences of the North Indian couple Amit and Dimple.

Keywords: Expatriate, Immigrant, Diaspora, Assimilate, Migration, Alienation

Introduction

Of people belonging to different nationalities, Indians secure a noticeable position in migration. This factor has contributed to the growth of the Indian diasporic literature. The term ‘diaspora’ is derived from the Greek word ‘Diasperin’ which is “the combination of ‘Dia’ meaning ‘over’ and ‘Sperin’, ‘to sow’, as in scattering or planting” (Cameron 86). Accordingly, diaspora refers to uprooting the people from their native places and re-rooting them in a new country. In general, the term *Diaspora* refers to movement or displacement of people to a foreign country.

The diasporic literature acquaints the readers with issues common to the immigrants such as identity crisis, sense of loneliness and alienation, immigrant and expatriate experience, cross-cultural confrontation, cultural transformation, migrants’ attitude of clinging to myths and symbols of their homelands etc.

Bharati Mukherjee

Bharati Mukherjee, a Bengali immigrant writer, enunciates her experiences as an expatriate and an immigrant through her novels. Having started her life as an expatriate in Canada, Mukherjee explicates the plight of the expatriates Amit and Dimple in her novel *Wife* where she shows how an Indian woman becomes a neurotic due to culture shock and lack of understanding between the couple.

Mukherjee’s Depiction of Expatriates and Immigrants in *Wife*

In general, the term expatriate and immigrant refer to the people who live outside their mother country. But Mukherjee uses the word expatriate to refer to people who find it difficult to adjust with the foreign culture and “build a cocoon around herself/himself as refuse from cultural

dilemmas and from the experienced hostility or unfriendliness in the new country' (Gomez 72). On the contrary, an "immigrant willingly celebrates the present in the new country" (Kumar 17).

The Indian society restricts girls from socializing with a view to protecting their purity. Hence, girls long to get married at the earliest in order to enjoy freedom. Accordingly, Mukherjee's protagonist Dimple dreams of getting liberty through marriage. Besides, she wants to lead a cozy life abroad. Interestingly, she gets married to a promising engineer, Amit Das Gupta, who is in search of a job in the US or Canada.

The thought of migration deprives Dimple of the basic Indian values. It is quite disheartening to see Dimple's act of aborting her own baby for "she does not want to carry any relics from her old life" (Wife 42). In reality, she wants to be free from responsibilities and enjoy her life on the foreign soil. Dimple's cruelty, "is a sacrament of liberation from the traditional roles and constraints of womanhood" (Sharma13).

Dimple's love for foreign life makes one feel that she will succeed in making the adopted land her home. But Dimple proves to be a total misfit in her adopted land for she does not possess the qualities needed for an immigrant such as adaptability, adjustability and understanding. In addition, Dimple lacks courage and trembles when she hears of rape, murder and violence in the basement of the building where she resides. Therefore, "the thought of living in America terrified her" (Wife 47). Dimple starts her much awaited foreign life on the basis of fear.

Portrayal of Americanized Indians and Indian Americans

Mukherjee feels that the Americanized Indians move closely with the Americans, imitate their life style and end up their life with frustration, whereas the Indian Americans know their goals and give importance to preserving their Indian culture. Also, they create a "little India" comprising families of the Bhattacharyas, Sens, Mehtas and Khannas. Their togetherness keeps them away from loneliness, alienation and exposes them to their cultural background. Here, it is apt to quote the views of N. Jayaram on Indian diasporans:

Having almost unique cultural histories and being subjected to two different economic and political situations, the Indian communities abroad have evolved as distinct diasporic entities. They are nevertheless Indian as they manifest in varying degrees the survival, persistence or retention of several social patterns and cultural elements whose roots and substance can be traced to India. (17)

Dimple and Amit suffer a lot due to migration. Initially, Amit hunts for a job and finds no time to understand the needs of his wife in the new socio cultural environment. Since Dimple wanted to experience freedom, she hates sharing the Sen's apartment, which has an Indian aura that expects her to behave like a true Indian wife. This phase affects Dimple mentally and emotionally and it creates an adverse effect on her outlook on life.

Effects of Trauma

Dimple's second phase of life starts when Amit gets a job. The couple move away from the Indian ghettos and live in a spacious apartment in Greenwich. While Amit lives under the pressure of retaining his hard-earned job, Dimple feels lonely and turns to the media where she witnesses violence and confused about life. The impact of media creates in her a strange liking for words like "murder, suicide, and mugging". Media becomes her only companion. Dimple trusts it more than people and under its influence she plans to commit suicide. She confines herself within the four walls and this wretched condition turns her abnormal. On Dimple's problem, Linda Sandler comments, "She is uprooted from her family and her familiar world and projected into a social vacuum where the surrogate community, her global village. New York intensifies her frustrations and unhooks her further reality...." (75).

Loneliness and Alienation

Foreign life gives Dimple a sense of loneliness and alienation. Dimple compares her life in Calcutta with that of America because "She is scared of self-service elevators, policemen, gadgets and appliances... She does not want to lose her identity but feels isolated, trapped, alienated, and marginalized" (Choudhury 84). It is a pity that Dimple realizes her Indian values only after her failure to assimilate with it and therefore, longs to be a part of India and its culture. She extols the

religious practices that give her a secured feeling to one's existence in the midst of crisis. Hence, she feels that "she could not live with people who didn't understand Durga Pujah" (*Wife* 114). It is quite surprising to note these words from a woman who hated her native land.

Solace from Religion and Rituals

Dimple's attachment to religion and rituals shows the throbbing of Indian pulse in her, despite her attempts to adapt to the alien culture. In addition, it throws light on an Indian woman's failure to assimilate with the foreign ways of life. Certainly, this Indianness in Dimple prevents her from moral deterioration.

Moral Degeneration

The Indian Americans do not move with either the Americans or the Americanised Indians. But when Dimple gets a chance to move with the Americanized Indians Ina Mullick, Milt Glasser and Lena Anaspatch, she is easily carried away by their life style. She decides to end her present sufferings and start her life anew. She wants to be a true immigrant who does not long for the lost country. She struggles hard to become one with the alien culture. She socializes with the Americanized Indians and even goes to the extent of enjoying all the forbidden pleasures. In fact, her illicit relationship with Milt Glasser is, "a passionate attempt to find an identity in America" (Indira 63).

Mocking at American Life

The Indian roots in Dimple mock her American life and makes her desperate for overstepping the moral codes. Defeat at every quarter of life disillusion Dimple and makes her "furious, desperate; she felt sick. It was as if some force was impelling her towards disaster" (*Wife* 156). The alien soil makes both the husband and wife alien to each other. The couple do not communicate their feelings that lead them to a disastrous end.

Passing on the Blame to Others

After violating the moral codes, Dimple again turns to media. She fixes the blame on her husband and wants to save her from further moral degeneration. She becomes schizophrenic, sees her body and soul apart. She develops insomnia and her association with media does not allow her to differentiate the “reel” life from the “real” life. She emotionally breaks down. The Indian values lying dormant in her condemn her infidelity to her husband. She puts the blame on her husband and wants to save herself from further moral degeneration. Having lost her mental balance completely, she kills her husband – her final moral degeneration:

She sneaked upon him and chose a spot, her favourite spot just under the hair line, where the mole was getting larger and browner ... she touched the mole very lightly and let her fingers draw a circle around the delectable spot, then she brought her right hand up and with the knife stabbed the magical circle once, twice, seven times, each time a little harder, until milk in the bowl of cereal was a pretty pink...and then she saw the head fall off...women on television got away with murder (*Wife* 212-213).

Thus, Mukherjee portrays the psychic breakdown of an Indian woman very effectively.

Immigrants’ Struggle

Mukherjee through *Wife* highlight the sufferings of the immigrants in consequence of their assimilation with the foreign culture. The novelist feels that the immigrants struggle hard because of their desire to keep the Indian culture in tact in a country where “salad-bowl” culture is in vogue. Mukherjee reflects the strength of the Indian soil in molding the lives of the Indians abroad. Indians do not violate the moral codes as long as they live in the artificially created Indian atmosphere. Dimple does not violate moral codes, as long as she lives in the Sen’s apartment, which has an Indian aura. On the contrary, when Dimple moves to Greenwich, she degenerates morally owing to her exposure to the American culture. In general, it is obvious that the Indians struggle to protect their culture regardless of the hardships.

Conclusion

Mukherjee takes up the issues related to the first-generation immigrants, particularly, the expatriates who cling to their culture and are reluctant to accept changes. The expatriates bring forth the idea that the immigrants totally assimilate with the alien culture through their total

assimilation with the new culture. But the expatriates do not absorb the other culture and lead life on the strength of the Indian soil. Though the immigrants and the expatriates are basically Indians, they adopt different strategies for leading their lives abroad.

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